

Sureshbabu Through the Notes of Yaman

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Yaman'! This word means everything to me in my life and in my music. The notes of Yaman befriended me right from the day I began to learn music. They have guided me; they have given me moments of relief and happiness. Yet, they also remind me of something precious that I have lost. This loss is ever fresh in my heart. When I feel weak, the pain is even more acute. It is connected with my guru Sureshbabu Mane, fondly called Baburao. He led me from the grammar of music to its divine essence and even beyond that. It is impossible to assess the value of his teaching and the benefits that I received from it.

One can never really measure what one has gained in the proximity of one's guru. To make such an estimate in terms of the number of ragas and compositions learnt would be quite meaningless. Sureshbabu had penetrated the soul of music, and this experience he continuously endeavoured to share with his disciples. I consider myself most fortunate that the Holy Ganges of music descended upon me in the person of Sureshbabu. On the banks of this pure and sublime river, one cannot but witness the grandeur of music itself.

I was overjoyed that through my association with Sureshbabu, I could embark upon a pilgrimage of music. But alas, halfway through our journey, he unexpectedly passed away and left me alone. His sudden demise created a void. For the rest of the pilgrimage, I have had to be content with the company of his memories and the ever-fresh pain of his sudden demise every time I remembered him.

Music entered my life accidentally. A well-wisher once suggested that my mother should learn music to alleviate the pain of her illness. As a child, I used to sit and listen to her harmonium lessons. A teacher from our school used to come to teach my mother, but she did not take to music. Instead, I picked up the tunes he taught her; so my father decided I should take lessons in classical music. A few months later, another teacher, Vijay Karandikar, took the place of the teacher from my school. He introduced me to the concepts of raga and tala and taught me a few Khayals. By this time, I had started participating in various competitions and singing in public functions like the Ganesh festival.

Once I was invited to sing at Savada in Khandesh by a patron of music for his son's naming ceremony. As usual, I had my meal after the concert. When I woke up next morning, I found my voice queer. I could not utter a syllable. When I returned to Pune, I was treated by various ENT specialists but nothing helped bring back my voice. Had any one given me something to eat that damaged my voice permanently? Or had my voice broken as in the case of boys at the age of puberty? Girls generally do not face this problem. Nobody could tell how I lost my voice. One doctor suggested that my tonsils should be removed. I was sent to Hyderabad to my aunt's place for the operation. The operation did not greatly improve my

condition. I recall struggling many hours every day to regain my voice. Slowly, it returned, but it was never the same. The shock of having lost my voice still lingers in my heart.

My parents were both teachers. Having no musical background, they could only hand me over to a music teacher.

Although I had entered the world of music, I was just a beginner. It never occurred to me that I should seek guidance to go beyond what I knew. It was my father's late friend, Vaidyaraj Deshpande, a connoisseur of music and brother of the well-known musicologist Vamanrao Deshpande, who suggested that I should learn from an accomplished musician. In fact, after listening to me, he insisted that I learn from Sureshbabu Mane. At that time, I had neither seen nor heard Sureshbabu. I only knew that he was the elder brother of Hirabai Barodekar, the famous singer. Vaidyaraj Deshpande spoke to Sureshbabu on my behalf and Sureshbabu agreed to consider teaching me only after listening to me. The first time I saw Sureshbabu was when I sang for him. He listened to me as a judge. I sang raga Madhuwanti and Bade Ghulam Ali Khansaheb's famous Dadra '*Ka karun sajani*'. He consented to teach me; I was overjoyed. I had passed a difficult test.

I was in the pre-matriculation year of school, i.e., the ninth class, when I started my lessons with Sureshbabu. After school, I used to cycle directly to his house, which was at the other end of the city. I used to reach his home panting and exhausted after a long ride. Observing my strain and exertion, Sureshbabu came to our home a few days later and told my mother, in my absence, "Don't send Prabha there. I will come here myself." And he would come all the way to teach me. Hidden within his tall, stout frame was a heart as gentle as his notes. At first sight he seemed aloof, even harsh, but I received boundless affection from him. He openly appreciated every single virtue I had. Barely a year after I had started learning from Sureshbabu, I went with him to Miraj to participate in Abdul Karim Khansaheb's death anniversary programme. My matriculation results were to be announced on the same day in Pune. In the otherwise tuneless atmosphere, there was a feeling of restlessness as I awaited the results. Early next morning, a telegram was delivered into Sureshbabu's hands. I had passed. He was even more jubilant than I, and he ordered sweets. He praised me to everybody and even decided whether I should go into the Arts or Science stream.

I could enjoy Sureshbabu's company for less than six years. Even during that time, he was frequently away on concert tours. Once, when he went to Africa to give concerts with his sister Hirabai, he was away for as long as six months. While in Pune, I would scold him like a little girl if he did not come home. He would fondly say to my mother, "usually, a *guru* scolds his disciple, but here the situation has reversed. A disciple should fear the guru, but in fact it is I who fear your daughter!"

Every year during the Ganesh festival, a special dinner used to be arranged at Hirabai's residence, followed by a concert in the evening. The task of preparing the main dish fell upon Sureshbabu. He used to say, "A singer must be able to cook well. If you eat well, you can sing well; do not make a fuss about oily or sour things". Neither did he himself ever observe any dietary restrictions nor did he allow us to do so. He would say, "You should have the heart

of an artist and the body of a wrestler. You do not sing only with your throat; every organ in your body helps you sing." Although he would be tired after spending the whole day in the kitchen, he listened to every artist attentively.

Sureshbabu detested outward show. His heart was pure, innocent, and generous. He loved children. He would play with them like a child himself. Ordinarily a very grave and quiet man, Sureshbabu could make children laugh endlessly. After my lesson, there would be another '*mehfil*'. All the neighbours' children would gather and wait for Sureshbabu to tell stories, perform magic tricks, and imitate animals. This '*mehfil*' was always a success.

He would ask the children, "What shall I show you today?" Someone would reply, "Show us a deer!" Immediately he would arrange his fingers and the shadow of a deer would appear on the wall. The children would start clapping joyfully. Even adults were astonished by his card tricks. He would say "Chooo", and the coin in his hand would disappear. He would split his thumb into half and join it again. He would skilfully make a small mouse with a handkerchief and make it skip and jump on his palm. The children would squeal with joy and excitement and ask, "How does it jump?" "Oh! That is magic", he would answer. Sureshbabu made children laugh so much that their sides ached. Then he would catch my eyes and say, "Prabha, he who lives up above also performs magic, but we don't see His hands."

Sureshbabu had experienced life fully. He had caressed both its sharp and flat notes with love. Even though material success was not his lot, he had found harmony in the midst of his turbulent life through his subtle humour and appreciative attitude. He was a true *rasika* in his outlook towards life; he knew how to savour its *rasa*. He had endured suffering quietly and whenever he found a moment of happiness, he drank of it deeply. Fate did not favour him, but he never demeaned himself. He never flattered anyone to win favours. Intelligent and honest, he was unperturbed by the fact that he did not receive the recognition that was due to him for his art. He was so impractical in his dealings that for many of his concerts he did not charge any fee. He did not run after either wealth or fame.

Perhaps he was carefree because he knew his sister Hirabai was there to support him. Hirabai shouldered all the responsibility of Sureshbabu's large family. Although she was younger to him, Sureshbabu had great respect for her. He would seek her advice even on small matters. He took special care never to hurt her. He felt proud to have a famous and respected sister like her. He always used to tell me, "Your *tar shadja* should be like Champutai's [Hirabai's pet name]. It radiates like a full moon touching every heart."

It is common to begin a new disciple's training with raga Yaman*. Yaman is like a vast ocean whose limits are beyond one's sight. When an artist approaches Yaman, he has to be humble. Although I had already learnt this raga from Vijay Karandikar, Baburao started my training with Yaman. For months, he taught me only this raga. A year passed, but Yaman continued.

* Yaman—one of the main ragas of Hindustani music has all the seven notes—straight, simple, ascending and descending. The raga offers vast scope for imagination and improvisation, making it challenging to bring out a coherent picture of the raga.

At last, out of boredom, I asked Baburao one day, "Why learn Yaman every day? Please teach me something else." Baburao looked at me, smiled and said, "If you think you have completely mastered Yaman, we will take another raga". I had no answer. I hardly had any understanding at that stage and I thought that the number of ragas one learnt was important.

The Yaman which I heard while Baburao taught me would elude my memory like a mirage when I tried to remember it while practising by myself. When I mentioned this to Baburao, he said, "It is my desire that you think on your own. That is why I never teach you precomposed phrases or give you notation. The Yaman you sing must express yourself. It must have your mark." While practising, I frequently lost my way, for it was so difficult to recall whatever was taught. Moreover, every lesson had a 'new' Yaman. Through this method, Baburao made me take initiative and be independent. Today, I am able to explore my own creative potential because Baburao gave me insight, understanding, and confidence in my ability to think for myself.

Being gifted with a naturally sweet voice is one thing and being continuously conscious of tunefulness is quite another. With this realisation, every time I sang a note, I felt the need to be alert to sustain its exact pitch. A light voice tends to move erratically, so one should develop such control over the voice so as to produce only the desired movements of the notes with the appropriate weight and expression. Every movement should be attractive, meaningful, and polished, and should have a purpose in the overall design. Baburao would give a single note a variety of expressions with swift, subtle, and graceful decoration. He would proceed towards every note gently and tenderly. His movements were so delicate that one hardly noticed them, or realized the difference made in the structure around the same note. By varying the movement, stress, tempo, and emotional shading, by approaching it from different angles, and by projecting it through different phrasing, the same note was given a variety of expressions. By changing the context, he would make the same note appear different. These variations can be made only through reflection and awareness. The habit of imitation prevents one from becoming creative. Imitation and memorization have a tendency to make one sing mechanically. Raga music is not simply a matter of mathematical combinations. It is a quest, an exploration of beauty, divinity, through note and rhythm. Its ideal is to transcend the constraints imposed by the raga's rules. The joy of discovery that the artist gains through this search must also reach the heart of the listener. This is the most difficult challenge for any performer, and the success of a concert depends on it.

Baburao's teaching instilled in me the ideal that every concert is really an exercise in creativity—a search for a new within the framework of tradition. While teaching a Khayal in raga Yaman, Baburao also gave me insights into other musical forms such as the Thumri, Bhajan, etc. He would say, "look Prabha, when this very phrase in Yaman is sung like this, you get the flavour of Thumri, with this other expression you get the flavour of a Bhajan." When I understood his discerning observation through practical experience, many things became clear and simple. One of the most important things which I realized in music is that the rendering and expression of notes vary in the context of individual forms such as Khayal,

Thumri, Bhajan, etc. Each form has its distinct tonal quality, movement, expression, and flavour. After Yaman, Baburao taught me a dozen other ragas so quickly that I was taken aback.

I later realized that since I had learnt how to explore Yaman in detail, I instinctively knew how to develop a given raga once I had its basic outline. So if I were asked today how many ragas Baburao taught me, I would unhesitatingly say, "Only Yaman."

Baburao encouraged the talent I had for singing Thumri in a peculiar way. He would make me sing Bade Ghulam Ali Khan's and Begum Akhtar's Thumris in public. He also made me sing film songs of singer-actress Noorjahan whom I liked very much. In those days, students were forbidden even to listen to music other than that of their own *gharanas*. Furthermore, it was beyond one's imagination to get permission and encouragement from the guru to sing the music of other *gharanas*. It was thought to be highly improper even to mention film music. The freedom which Baburao gave me was unbelievable.

I used to like both the Purab and Punjab styles of Thumri-singing. My own Thumri-singing thus reflected the influence of both. I was also strongly attracted to the voice of the famous actress Noorjahan. Her clear pronunciation, caressing and poignant notes, and romantic expression influenced my singing. Baburao never objected to these influences; on the contrary, he taught me how to appreciate whatever was beautiful in other musics and how to assimilate it into my own. When Baburao sang a phrase and elaborated it, he never expected or insisted that I reproduce it. Instead, he would continue to sing another phrase and ask me to expand on it.

Baburao constantly encouraged me to think independently. By constantly guiding me, he nurtured in me that unique sense of aesthetic discrimination—to know what is beautiful and what is not.

Baburao rarely insisted on any one particular way to realize the beauty of music. He constantly prompted me to seek my own path. In his method of teaching, there was no trailing behind, but walking alongside. The fact that I have travelled this far after he left me is because of his manner of teaching.

Baburao never asked me whether I had woken up early to practise note-intonation or note-exercises, how long I practised, or whose music I listened to. Perhaps he was able to surmise all this from my singing, and he was pleased. I always felt that his reticence was an expression of quiet approval and faith.

Baburao had many students, but I was never curious to know how and what he taught them. All his students would come together during Gauri-pooja when a music programme was held at Hirabai's place, and also during Ustad Abdul Karim Khansaheb's death-anniversary programme at Miraj. Baburao was not only a great musician but also a generous and sensitive teacher. He never expressed annoyance, boredom, or restlessness but taught with patience, ease, and simplicity. He had the knack of inspiring students to sing at their best. Many fine musicians are unable to teach. It is much easier to develop one's own musical skills than to nurture and shape those of another. To achieve this, one has to be completely

devoted to teaching. One has to sacrifice one's time, energy, and self-interest. How many students are aware of what their guru has done for them?

I can never forget the morning when my first student gave me the status of a guru. In a pleading voice she said, "I love your singing; will you please teach me?" At that time I had no experience of teaching, but it was difficult to refuse. After her, I accepted many more students. Teaching opened up a new arena of experience to me. It was a great challenge and carried a heavy responsibility. Each student has her peculiar problems. Her ability to grasp and to reproduce varies, her vocal flexibility and range differ.

After having been a guru for many years, I now realize how difficult it is to keep alive the artist in oneself while fulfilling the responsibilities of a teacher. The artist has much at stake when he takes upon herself the responsibility of teaching. If one is not careful in selecting one's students, it can happen that in the process of teaching, one's own singing gets affected by that of the students. In giving students vision, one may lose one's own sight. The task of continuously listening to and correcting students' mistakes can lead the guru himself into a rut. Teaching can adversely affect one's voice, imagination, and performance if one is not constantly alert. That is why most musicians take to teaching after they retire from public concerts. There is a great sacrifice involved in becoming a guru.

But imparting knowledge is the most precious offering one can make. There is a saying in Sanskrit, 'The more knowledge you give away the more it grows'. When my students celebrated their first guru-poonima*, Baburao was constantly in my heart. This auspicious day had come in my life due to his blessings. Had he been alive to witness the day, I am sure he would have been tremendously proud, and would have also blessed his 'grandstudents'.

Baburao often used to say with pride, "when Prabha becomes a guru, I would automatically become a 'grand-guru'." He used to joke, "Prabha, you should have so many generations of students, that with each 'ru' in 'guru-ru', your students will know whether I am their grand-guru, great-grand-guru, or great-great-grand-guru." At that time, we used to laugh heartily. If only he had lived to see his grandstudents! They would have called him 'guru-ru' and he would have taught them just as a grandfather teaches his grandchildren.

Baburao learnt the basics of music from the great Kirana singer Abdul Karim Khansaheb. Later on, he developed his artistic talent independently. As it was not in his nature to do anything on a regular basis, including his *riyaz*, he managed to keep his artistic self alive mainly through deep contemplation. It was common to see Baburao with his tanpura only two days before a concert. Otherwise, he seldom practised. His polish and virtuosity drew upon his days of practice under Abdul Karim Khansaheb. Unlike other performers, his music depended not on his *riyaz*, but on his intelligence and will power. It is said that on a few occasions great masters like Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, who were reputed for their incessant

* Guru-poonima is a day when students formally offer respect to their guru; it is in vogue especially in the field of performing arts in India. Guru-poonima supposedly marks the day when Siddhartha became the Buddha—the full-moon day of Ashadha, which usually falls in July.

practice, showed hesitation or unwillingness to sing after Baburao. Such was the strength of his will and the power of his performance.

Although Baburao was proud of the Kirana *gharana*, he always respected and appreciated the artistic virtues of other *gharanas*. Their influence upon him was reflected in the richness of his music. Baburao could sing practically all forms of vocal music like the Khayal, Thumri, *Natyasangeet* (Marathi stage songs) and Bhajan with equal mastery. He was one of the few musicians in Maharashtra in that period who was drawn to the Punjabi style of Thumri singing. He adapted that style within the framework of the Kirana *gharana*. It blossomed like a flower, adding regional beauty and sweetness.

Baburao's singing was intelligent, tuneful, aesthetically rich, tender, and balanced. His music came through intuition, imagination, and will power, not through hard labour. There was no aggressiveness in it, only a surrender to his quest. His singing appeared to be very simple and easy, yet it was extremely difficult to imitate. He sang intricate phrases with such ease that one would seldom notice their complexity. With a smile, he used to say, "Sing in such a way that after the concert, your music eludes the memory of your audience. They should just be filled with the aura of the music that lingers on."

Baburao's sweet tone was the life of his singing. Deep yet delicate, it felt like a feather stroking the skin. It had a touch that one longed to feel in the depths of one's heart. His tone had no rough edges to it. His phrases were always rounded with neatly drawn curves and were laced with aesthetic embroidery through *kan* and *khatka* ornaments.

Whenever Baburao sang, his appearance and gestures were always pleasant. The emotions that filled his notes were reflected in his eyes. The typically absorbed and distant look in his eyes disappeared and his eyes communicated in tune with his singing. The red *tika* on his dark forehead stood out prominently. Referring to it he used to say, "We must worship our own destiny." He never left home without putting on a *tika*. The faith which he lived by was reflected in such observances.

All my musical faith was placed in Baburao and the day he unexpectedly left us, I was shattered. Even as I write, that day is fresh in my mind. It was my first year in Law College and my examinations were approaching. My classes were held in the morning, but one particular day, it so happened that I had to stay late in college. When I returned, Baburao was waiting for me. We sang for several hours and my heart was filled with contentment. Before leaving Baburao said, "I have now given you everything that you need to know."

When I heard these words, I felt I had received the reward of my faith and hard work. I realized that it was now necessary to forge ahead at a quicker pace on my path. With the determination to do so, I went to sleep. The next morning Baburao's son came to tell us, "Baburao died of heart failure early this morning." Although I watched his body being swallowed in flames that evening, I could not accept the fact that I would never see him again. In fact, he often came in my dreams and taught me.

This was my first encounter with the death of a loved one. My sense of loneliness was unbearable. I felt orphaned. For months I did not touch the tanpura. The inspiration behind

my singing had left me. Perhaps the reason why my music has a forlorn and melancholy touch is my guru's untimely death. Baburao left me as *unexpectedly as he had come into my life*. Yet even as he left, he made sure that I would be capable of walking alone along the path to beauty and divinity in music.

A few years after he had passed away, I left Pune to join All India Radio—first in Ranchi, then Nagpur, and later at Mumbai. Working with AIR gave me the opportunity to meet and listen to many great musicians. By listening to them at close quarters, I learnt many things. But I was always conscious of Baburao's advice that my music had to be 'my music'. On the strength of Baburao's teaching, I was able to assimilate ideas gained through exposure to other music and musicians who attracted me.

Baburao infused many qualities into my singing—poise, subtlety, sensitivity, clarity, novelty, aesthetic awareness, balance, independence, and even that unique romantic flavour. I learnt from Baburao's Yaman that repetition and monotony could be avoided even while following tradition. Whatever little success I have gained today is due to his Yaman.

It is sad to see the state in which the *guru-shishya parampara* stands today. Art is measured in terms of money, popularity, and success; what was once a dignified and sacred relationship has now become totally a commercial transaction. Is it possible to find the committed guru and the faithful student in modern society? This reminds me of a story which Baburao narrated to me about a guru and his disciple. Once the guru asked his disciple to accompany him to heaven. The disciple was pleased and he readily agreed. In preparation, the guru asked his disciple to kill a serpent and collect its poison in a bowl. After reciting hymns, the guru divided the poison into two bowls. Keeping one for himself, he asked the disciple to drink the other. The disciple was terrified that he might die painfully; so he refused. The guru tried to assure him that he would definitely attain heaven, but the disciple said, "No guruji, you go ahead and experience the bliss of heaven. I am content here." The guru sighed and drank the poison from both the bowls. To the disciple's amazement, his guru flew directly to heaven. Repenting, he wished he had obeyed his guru. A few drops of poison had remained in the bowls which he greedily began to lick; he too began to fly, but to his dismay only from one house to another and from one tree to another. With just a few drops, how could he have the power to fly to heaven? This was the result of his lack of faith and obedience.

Sant Kabir has said, "He who does not improve in the company of good men is indeed very unfortunate." Similarly, the disciple who remains dull and out of tune in the company of his guru is also unfortunate. The word 'guru' has a deep meaning—he who makes one great is one's guru. Even if the disciple has the potential to grow, it depends on the guru whether or not he will encourage the disciple to grow independently and bloom, or whether he will put his disciple in his own shadow. Today, if I can claim my music as being my own, the credit goes to my guru's endeavour in making me think independently. He taught me how to be sensitive and appreciative in life. He never insisted that I should look at and experience music from his angle. He gave me the colours of notes and the brush of rhythm and left me

alone to paint whatever I wanted. He approved of and admired free and beautiful expression, which had roots in tradition. The ideal guru spoken of in the Vedas and Upanishads can be appreciated through such a guru as Baburao.

The relationship between guru and shishya is like the confluence of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna. Though they join to become one, they still retain their individual identities.

A unique feature of Indian culture is its tradition of nurturing the disciple through his constant association with the guru. Unfortunately, the philosophy behind this relationship has been forgotten. Only when the essence of this tradition is rediscovered, will its significant contribution to the preservation and enrichment of every art be appreciated.

Many years have passed since Baburao left me. I often feel that my Yaman is incomplete. If Baburao were here, I would have persuaded him to teach me Yaman again. Yaman and I are inseparable, for Yaman is my tender link to Baburao. Even at those times when my concerts are a success, I feel very lonely. I keep wishing that Baburao was alive to witness his disciple's success. A single word of praise or blessing would have lightened my load and accelerated my pace in music.

When I am lonely, I picture Baburao vividly and feel his presence through each note of Yaman. The pressure on my mind lightens and my path becomes clear. I begin to walk along it with the confidence given to me by him—my guru. Whenever I finish a *mehfil*, I hear applause. Deep down in my heart, there is joy. With every concert, may there be the tuneful drone of tanpuras, the sweet applause and the joyous ecstasy of success, so that my duty as Baburao's disciple is fulfilled.